

HASHIM AMLA

The Significant Other

What once set **Hashim Amla** apart from his teammates has now made the Proteas batsman one of the most popular sportsmen in South Africa.

BY ANGUS POWERS

Photographs by Brett Florens



Durban

is in a strange Monday mood. There are white horses on the Umgeni river. Hundreds of palm trees planted along the beachfront in time for the FIFA World Cup look like tsunami survivors. They haven't taken root; and now, little more than ragged brown stumps, they're being shredded by a howling north-easter. A woman in full purdah strolls past the coffee shop I'm sitting in. At the next table, a family on holiday (Dad's already shirtless) tuck into a late breakfast. According to this

morning's sports pages, prodigal KwaZulu-Natal son Kevin Pietersen has been a pleasure to have back on sabbatical at the Dolphins. Particularly for leg-spinner Imran Tahir, who took 21 wickets in two SuperSport Series matches under the mentorship of the former England captain. It seems the only thing approximating normality here is that the man I'm due to meet is bang on time, pulling up to the kerb in his white Toyota Rav4, fresh from smash-

ing two One-Day International centuries in three days.

Hashim Amla's played cricket all over the world, but when his time's his own, it's here on Durban's beaches that he'd rather be. The Golden Mile is almost his second home: his older brother, Ahmed, owns a seaside apartment down the road; his agent lives round the corner; their mosque is a stone's throw away; and Kingsmead, of course, is barely a kilometre as the crow flies from the beach break (and plenty of the Dolphins' fitness sessions are sweated out on those sands). But the bearded, bespectacled and shaven-headed Amla is hardly anyone's idea of a North Beach local... and there you have it: exactly the kind of puzzle which has accompanied this cheerful 27-year-old for most of his life. Not that Amla himself is a contradiction, but that others find him so.

Perhaps that should be in the past tense. Found him so. The longer Amla has gone about his business as a decent Muslim lad who's good at cricket, the more people have come to realise that maybe their preconceptions were complicating things unnecessarily. In fact, by the time Amla won the Cricket South Africa Fans' Cricketer of the Year award in July, most people had forgotten that they had ever been anything but massive Hashim Amla supporters in the first place. Those widely-voiced doubts over his technique when he was dropped after three Test matches in 2005? Ancient history! His declining, for religious reasons, to wear the logo of South African Breweries, the Proteas' sponsor? Always understood! Being embraced by a team culture more secular than his own? Easy! So, when a

man walks up to us in the street, grasps Amla's hand and earnestly says, "Well done, Hash!", it's tempting to think the congratulations might be meant as much for all those priceless, less tangible triumphs as for that imperious 110 hit against Zimbabwe the day before.

Amla's always stood out. When he was at Durban High School (DHS), he was the new boy from Tongaat, a sugarcane-processing town 40km up the coast from Durban. DHS is an institution steeped in tradition (their headmaster still feels comfortable posing – albeit in jest – for a newspaper photograph



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wielding a cane) that has produced more national cricketers (30) than any other school in the country. Their coaches served Amla well. After dabbling in U15 rugby, he made his first-class cricket debut at 16, and played the touring England side a few weeks later, facing an attack that included Andy Caddick, Andrew Flintoff and Phil Tufnell. At 21, he captained his province and received his first Test cap. And in six years he has accumulated some serious numbers. In 46 Tests, Amla averages – at 45.10 – well in excess of Test cricket's gold standard of 40, and for a player supposedly not suited to the limited-overs game, he boasts an average of 57.16 in 34 ODIs.

THE BEST
Amla's batting technique was criticised early on – now he's been named as one of the ICC Test team for 2010 (left).

'Boasts' is the wrong word. "I'm not really a big averages person," Amla corrects me. "But these days you can't get away from it. Everyone's always telling you about it, especially if you're doing well. JP [Duminy] was telling me the other day, 'Do you know what your average is?' I said, 'Don't tell me! I actually don't want to know!' Sometimes you feel embarrassed when they bring it up on the screen. Makes you feel a bit shy."

Amla has stood out for an inordinately long time too. Former national coach Mickey

Arthur, currently waking the sleeping giant of Western Australia cricket on a three-year contract in Perth, tried to poach the 18-year-old from the Dolphins when he was still coaching Griquas. But another former Proteas coach, Graham Ford – who is now back as Dolphins head coach after drilling their first XI for the first time 18 years ago – had spotted Amla long before that. "I first came across Hashim when he was a young primary school player who used to come to the Natal Building Society (NBS) academy along with the other talented youngsters," Ford recalls. "That's where he caught my eye – before he got to DHS, when he was still under-13 and living out in Tongaat."

Out in Tongaat, the younger Amla was serving a useful apprenticeship at the hands of his brother. Their grandparents had originally settled in Durban after emigrating from the Indian province of Gujarat (home of Mahatma Gandhi), but their father, a doctor, had moved the family to Tongaat when he opened his practice. Small town life meant endless backyard cricket, almost always played against bigger and more skillful boys. "Hashim's a lot tougher than me," admits Ahmed, older by almost four years. "He has to be - he got pushed around and sorted out for 21 years at home!" While their sister concentrated on the studies which would culminate in her medical degree, Ahmed made his debut for the Dolphins two seasons ahead of Hashim and smoothed the road ahead for his younger brother. "The only things Hashim could learn from me are my mistakes! What not to do!" Ahmed's always had a great sense of humour, particularly considering he inherited the Dolphins captaincy from his brother.

"How did he get so good?" a stunned Kevin Pieterse asked Graham Ford while the Dolphins guys were watching Amla tap out his first century of the season against Zimbabwe in Bloemfontein. Because of how he practises, came the reply. Ford elaborates: "Anybody who's played sport at the level that those two gentlemen

have understands just how important the intensity of your practice and preparation is. Hashim practises with such intensity. At all times he attempts to take himself out of his comfort zone, and obviously if you're doing that, you're going to improve." That answer would have sobered up the England superstar, for KP, fallen on hard times in the runs department for the

Three Lions, couldn't do much better (with 36 and a duck) during his Dolphins adventure either.

Ask anyone. Amla's appetite for work, and his reputation for out-sized mental strength, precedes him. "He hits a lot of balls," says Lance Klusener admiringly. Klusener played with Amla at the Dolphins and is now a consultant coach there: "And if you hit a lot of balls and you're working really hard at your game, you're giving yourself the best opportunity."

It would be impressive enough if Amla's work-rate had resurrected his fortunes only in the five-day game, but Arthur, who belatedly gave

RUN MACHINE

A contented Amla in the Proteas change-room after the team's win against India in Nagpur in February - Amla posted 253*, his highest Test score.

Amla his chance in ODIs, equally credits his calmness under fire for his steady climb in the subsequent 30 months up to No 2 in the world ODI batting rankings. "Almost bulletproof to criticism," Arthur says.

Both latent qualities - work ethic and determination - were forged in the fire of self-examination after Amla was unceremoniously dumped from the Test side after scores of 24, 2, 1, 0, 25 and 10 at the start of the 2004/05 season. Not only was his unorthodox backlift dismissed as ridiculously flawed, but mean-spirited gossip questioned whether his selection had been on merit anyway. "When I first made the South African team," says Amla, "I thought I was batting the best I had ever done. I had got four hundreds [in eight innings for the Dolphins] and when I was dropped, it was like, 'No, he was only there for transformation.' I remember thinking, 'What the...?! No way, man! I was caning runs just the other week, and now all of a sudden...!'" He sighs. "But I guess people see things differently. What can you do?"



Just persevere and stick to your plans.”

Those plans involved relinquishing the Dolphins captaincy to free up his formidable resources and then bringing his furnace-like focus to bear on the faulty backlift. “The following season came and I wasn’t in the national team,” Amla remembers with a wry smile. “I scored the most runs on the domestic circuit and I never watched myself bat. One day I did watch a recording, and I thought, ‘Man, nothing’s changed! My backlift still looks exactly the same!’ But in my mind, I was thinking that it must have changed because all of a sudden, I’m scoring runs! I got a shock and that made me realise that you’ve got to find your own way of playing.”

Although others expected him to, Amla never felt any extra pride at being the first Indian cricketer to play for the Proteas. “It never struck me when I was picked. I felt happy and chuffed to play for South Africa, but being recognised as the first Indian didn’t add any prestige,” he says. It’s an attitude that confounded fans of every hue, from impatient whites wanting players of colour to support; to blacks, Indians and coloureds who were equally desperate for one of their own to break through to the highest level.

But given some perspective, the agitators now see that what Amla was saying was right all along: “Because of the demographics of our country, you can never get away from people seeing colour before seeing anything else. But the fact that you’re playing for your country is prestige enough.”

It is this ability of Amla’s to unerringly steer an independent and principled course through the minefield of South Africa’s excitable multiculturalism that has won him friends everywhere he goes. Call it what you will – humble, tranquil, charming, infuriating – but make no mistake, this inner certainty that Amla possesses is as hard as a rock, and it is deeply rooted in his Islamic faith. It’s never been anything but self-evident to Amla that there can be no value judgement attached to the differing beliefs that he or his teammates might happen to hold. It’s not good or bad. It just is. If Amla would prefer to pray five times a day and consult a different religious text, who is he to question others’ penchant for

alcohol and nightclubs? And vice versa.

“We always gave him space in the dressing-room,” reflects Arthur. “Because he’s not a talker, he’s a doer. Hash lives his religion to the nth degree. So when it came up that he didn’t want to wear the Castle Lager logo, that was 100% correct and taken brilliantly by the team. Hash doesn’t mess around with his religion. He’s devout and he lives his life that way.”

It’s never been in Klusener’s nature to beat around the bush: “Certainly Hashim’s been man enough to stand up for what his beliefs are. But, you know, at the end of the day, for the fans, it’s not really about that. It’s about winning games for South Africa.” Zulu’s right. The Proteas are no ‘joy luck club’. They’re a professional cricket outfit trying to play the most attractive, cut-throat cricket possible. Coincidence or not, neither is Amla’s faith a walk in the park. Fasting in the month of Ramadan – taking no

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LIMITED-OVERS SUCCESS

A ‘disappointing’ 92 for Amla at North Sound during the Proteas’ recent tour of the Windies – he scored two centuries in the five-match ODI series.



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food or water between sun-up and sundown – is not a joke in KwaZulu-Natal’s climate, specifically if you’re an athlete. When he’s in Durban, whether practising or playing, Amla scrupulously observes the fast. On tour, if the itinerary is not conducive to it, it’s accepted that Amla may make up any missed days at the end of Ramadan. What’s not in dispute is that the fast breeds powers of mental and physical endurance beyond the promises of any fitness programme, and it is that cast-iron discipline which marks everything Amla does.

“Fasting? I love it! Absolutely. Absolutely. I love it. What is there not to love about it?” exclaims Amla. “The physical discomfort? You get that in everything. You run 5km to gain fitness. It might hurt, but you know there’s benefit in it. I think I’ve gained more out of fasting when we’re playing or training than from the rest of the year.

Purely from the mental side. It really is tough, especially on a hot day in Durban. It gives me a much better understanding of what I’m capable of... and what the body’s capable of.”

Other cricketing challenges pale in comparison. Facing the new ball in ODIs, or after the fall of the first wicket in Tests, becomes an honour. Fielding at short leg will never be anything but unpleasant, but it’s still an opportunity. Not to get in the batsman’s face and aggressively dominate



his space, but to save runs and take catches and thus begin to develop – simply by doing the job – an oppressive presence just outside the batsman’s line of sight, exerting a silent pressure on his concentration, helping to induce an error, capture a wicket, and so contribute to the team’s cause. Modest, willing and deadly effective... is there a better description of a team man?

Amla possesses a special talismanic power for the Proteas. With successful stints at Essex and Nottinghamshire under his belt, he already has English counties jostling for his signature next year. But Amla’s in two minds about the prospect, “because to go to England after seven weeks

away at the Cricket World Cup might be a bit tough. Especially when we come back with the trophy!” His optimism is not misplaced. Amla’s never played in a World Cup, which is to say he hasn’t been scarred by the chokes which have become *de rigueur* for the Proteas at ICC tournaments. As a senior, influential player who averages over 50 and has an enviable 71% win rate in the ODIs that he’s played, the Proteas need Amla on the field. As a man who is worthy of universal respect, South Africans need him off the field too. He reminds us that only through our differences can we truly come to know ourselves. **SI**

*All stats correct as of 1/11/2010

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