



Lungi Ngidi: born to bowl



MAN OF THE MOMENT. With a smile on his face and a ball in his hand, new Proteas sensation Lungi Ngidi has bowled over cricket fans. Picture: Gallo Images

Proteas' smiling assassin

HUMBLE YOUNG MAN HAS THE CRICKETING WORLD AT HIS FEET

Heinz Schenk

When Lungi Ngidi was bowling at school, he was convinced he bowled like Andre Nel. You can't really blame people for laughing when they hear that, because it's one of the weirdest comparisons anyone could make.

"I grew up watching a lot of him," said Ngidi, smiling wryly, clearly conscious of how strange those words sounded. "I was absolutely certain that I bowled like him. But I realise now that was a bit off the mark."

Indeed, the Proteas' latest fast bowling gem's compact, vertical action contrasts sharply to Nel's gangly, almost wayward approach to the crease.

But that's not why people chuckle under their breath. One's rather reminded of how far the two international bowlers differ behaviourally.

Nel, despite an accomplished Proteas career, was a volatile character, known for at times over-the-top antics that frequently landed him in trouble with cricket's authorities. He even admitted to having an alter ego, "Gunther", whose odd appearances virtually always meant some craziness was on the way.

Ngidi is the consistent, thoughtful and poised head boy.

However, there's one thing that connect these two men: they can crack big smiles.

"I don't think there'll ever be a spe-

cific incident or anecdote that stands out for me about Lungi," admits Sean Carlisle, an executive headmaster and Ngidi's first-team coach at Hilton College in Pietermaritzburg.

"The thing that sums up Lungi is that smile. It was always bright when you saw him at school and I'm pleased to see it hasn't changed since he's become a professional in the limelight. He hasn't changed one bit."

Fame can change a sportsman in an instant, especially a "vulnerable" target like Ngidi. After all, this is the brave new world of renewed transformation efforts by South Africa's sporting federations.

There are now formal, aggressive quotas at franchise level and a stand-out performance like Ngidi's Man-of-the-Match showing in this week's victory in the second Test against India in Centurion is going to heap expectation on him by a country desperate to see more black excellence.

They've had the gift of Kagiso Rabada's rise to the top of the world Test rankings and they want more now.

"Lungi will stay grounded, of that I'm certain," said Carlisle.

"He worked immensely hard to gain himself a good education. His parents (a gardener and a domestic worker) weren't materially well-off but they gave him character.

"Lungi is a really special young man. He was really popular at school, everyone liked him and he showed leadership very early. He was even head boy of his boarding house. He applied all those lessons when he be-

came an adult."

Yet, Ngidi's easy-going nature doesn't mean he doesn't know what he wants. There's a stubborn will hidden behind the smile.

Pierre de Bruyn, the former Titans stalwart and successful Tuks coach, can attest to that. He was visiting Hilton when Neil Johnson, the former Natal and Zimbabwean opener who was coaching at the school, told him about a kid named Ngidi.

De Bruyn was immediately convinced.

"It took him three years [to convince me], actually," said Ngidi. "He first arrived in my Grade 10 year and asked me to come to the Titans then, and I

wasn't having it. But it was amazing how consistently he would arrive and keep asking for me. I wanted to see if he really meant it, so I also kind of played hard to get.

"Eventually, in my matric year, I wanted to further my studies and he offered me that opportunity."

De Bruyn himself revealed this week that it was a process.

The first conversation, in a small room in Hilton's main administrative building, was polite.

The second one, however, wasn't as De Bruyn showed the fight that made him such an underrated franchise cricketer.

"I don't think thanking him would be enough," Ngidi said.

"I wouldn't even know where to start. He moved me from where my cricket had taken a dip and brought me to a place where I'm now able to flourish as a sportsman."

The 21-year-old's struggles with injury – especially after a wonderful start to international cricket in last year's T20 series against Sri Lanka – are well documented. It clearly hasn't put the brakes on his meteoric rise.

"I'm not surprised about how well he's done," said legendary Proteas wicketkeeper and Titans coach Mark Boucher.

"That's where Lungi's really shown his worth. To come back from such a serious injury and back yourself to bowl at full pace shows his toughness mentally."

And, as always, he's done it with THAT smile...



POTENTIAL. It was clear from an early age at Hilton College that Ngidi was destined for greater things.

