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WINNING SMILE Lungi Ngidi of the Proteas took six wickets for 39 runs during day five of the second Sunfoil test match between South Africa and India at SuperSport Park, Pretoria, on Wednesday

PHOTO: GALLO IMAGES

Lungi's living his destiny

Embrace the challenge: this was how bowling wizard Lungisani Ngidi tackled his stunning Proteas debut

Lungisani "Lungi" Ngidi is the living, breathing embodiment of the saying that what is meant for you in life will never miss you. When he was seven, he was sitting on the embankment of the cricket field at Kloof Junior Primary School, near Durban, watching a "dads and lads" game, when someone asked him to join in, setting in motion the wheels of fate which would see him play for South Africa.

The son of a domestic worker, Ngidi's encouraging start that day got him the first of the bursaries which would see him through all three of his subsequent schools. The last was the prestigious private school in KwaZulu-Natal, Hilton College.

All that investment paid off spectacularly this week, when Ngidi announced his arrival to test cricket with a man-of-the-match performance against India, thanks to a fast bowling spell for the ages which yielded the seventh best figures by a Proteas player on debut: 6/39.

It was a performance which brought the strapping but genial 21-year-old with a ready smile front and centre to the minds of South Africans.

The striking thing about the University of Pretoria labour law student's first match as a test cricketer was how his nerves never looked like getting the better of him during the five-day match. Asked how he could remain so calm, Ngidi gave an answer that probably explains why he has always punched above his age, performance-wise.

"I think everyone has a formula to deal with it. Mine is to embrace challenges and not fear them. I ask myself what's the worst that can happen? I could do badly and get dropped, but I can work my way back again.

"But there are also amazing possibilities if you succeed, so I try to look at the positives. Yes, the game was against the number one team in the world, but it was at my home ground (SuperSport Park in Centurion, the stadium of Ngidi's domestic team, the Titans) so I actually had an advantage."

Amid the giddy excitement that swept cricket fans at the discovery of a new fast bowler who can send the ball hurtling towards batsmen at speeds up to 150km/h, spare a thought for Ngidi's parents, Bongi and Jerome, who ran the risk of spontaneously combusting with pride this week.

The two have shared as much of the limelight as their son this week and revealed the fact that his playmates call him Ntini because he is a fan of the former Proteas fast bowler. They told the Witness newspaper that he was an overachiever in other areas of his life as well, having bought them a house

at the age of 19. A sign of their son's maturity lies in how he has handled the tricky assignment of marrying being a domestic workers' son and being at a posh school like Hilton.

"I felt it, but I didn't let it get to me," he said last year. "I used it as motivation because I used to look at the parents and think 'one day I'll be in a position to send my kids to a school like this'. Also, my parents might be domestic workers, but we all had the same opportunities at the same school. "So I asked myself what was stopping me from achieving whatever I want in life?"

Asked if being at Hilton helped fast-track him to the Proteas like teammate and fellow fast bowler Kagiso Rabada, whose alma mater is St Sithians College in Johannesburg, Ngidi's answer suggests the onus will always be on the individual to succeed.

"I can understand how people can say that, but the important thing is the journey. Kloof was a government school, but I was still able to do well. But Hilton did help fast-track me, because of their systems and facilities."

Ngidi's journey already includes two stress fractures of the back, which cost him a place in the South African Under-19 team and the South Africa A side which toured England in June last year.

The latter injury was pivotal to where he is now, because it made him and his coach at the Titans, former Proteas wicketkeeper Mark Boucher, reassess his career. Boucher told Ngidi that, at 103kg, he was overweight and wouldn't succeed unless he shed some kilos.

"He made me very conscious of the fact that I could play for South Africa if I wanted to, I just had a lot of things to do, like lose weight," says Ngidi. He now weighs 95kg.

"He's very honest: if you're fat to him you're fat. It can come across as harsh to some, but for me it was more guidance than anything else."

The potential of Ngidi and Rabada bowling as the Proteas' opening partnership for years to come (Rabada is still only 22) has captured the imagination. They combined to take nine of the 10 Indian wickets to fall in the visitors' second innings.

Ngidi tells a story about the first time they played against each other for their schools, which probably outlines what they are like as people and as competitors: "I still remind him that he got me out and I got him out, but he didn't walk. He still maintains that he hit his pad and that the ball didn't touch his bat.

"But I'm really happy to be bowling with him."

