



Lungi loomed large... and look where he is now

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AS AN eight-year-old Kloof Junior Primary School pupil, cricket star Lungi Ngidi used to be so keen to get his dad out of bed to take him to weekend "dads and sons" cricket practices he would pull off his father's blankets on Saturday mornings.

"If I said I was tired, he would then force my eyes open," proud Jerome Ngidi said after watching Lungi's amazing bowling feats on his Proteas debut against India this week.

Young Lungi didn't have to drag his dad too far to the field. They lived on the school grounds. Jerome and his wife, Bongli, still live there as they have ever since Lungi was two years old.

That's when they took up jobs there as part of the maintenance and house-keeping staff, positions once held by Bongli's father and grandfather. Jerome had previously been a petrol attendant and Bongli a domestic worker, as well as a shop worker.

When they got their new jobs, they were worried about leaving little Lungi at their township home in Mariannhill, alone with only siblings. But Kloof Junior Primary was happy to have him there.

"Before he started pre-school, he came into the classroom where I was holding a readiness programme and completed it, aged two-and-a-half," said Grade 1 teacher Sharon Moffat.

"That's the kind of kid he was, determined and pushing himself hard, all through self-motivation."

Music teacher Debbie Noakes and after-care teachers "Granny Pat" Casten and Marlene Muir all took turns being babysitters to the young Lungi.

Bursar Jane Wilks organised that Lungi go to a nearby pre-primary school attended by her son and Lungi's friend, Christopher. After that Lungi acquired bursary after bursary, scholarship after scholarship, as one institution after the next each picked up that he was exactly the kind of person they wanted.

Kloof Senior Primary followed Kloof Junior. Then came Highbury Preparatory and after that, Hilton College and the University of Pretoria.

When Lungi started as a pupil at Kloof Junior Primary, he could hardly hold a ball, said former Physical Education teacher Robynne Thornton. "How he grew from here," she said. "At that junior level I had to just instil a love for the game."

And how he got to love it, his parents recalled. "He would always say: 'I want to be like Makhaya Ntini'," they recalled.

"They even called him 'Ntini!'"

When Highbury's former headmaster, Richard Stanley, asked him during his interview what he most wanted in life,

Lungi replied: "A brand-new cricket bat."

"I saw in that a little boy who was hungry to show us what he had to offer," said Stanley.

"Even at age nine I could see a tall, strong youngster. I could see he really did have some potential.

"He had four lovely years at Highbury, going from strength to strength. From the time he joined us, he always demonstrated first and foremost that he was most humble, but he was also aware that he had a lot to offer."

Stanley, who is now headmaster at The Ridge School in Joburg, said Lungi had moved on to his next scholarship school, Hilton College, "with a full battery of colours and honours". During his holidays from Hilton, Lungi often attended cricket training sessions back at Highbury and while at home he had the Kloof Junior Primary fields on which to practise.

His Hilton days saw him selected for the South Africa Under-19 side while still in Grade 11 and in his final year, he was head of Newnham House.

"He was obviously the kind of boy we were after," said former headmaster Peter Ducasse.

His parents credited former Zimbabwe international player and Hilton College coach Neil Johnson and Shane Gaffney, the former director of sport, for much of his high school cricket development.

"Lungi would say that even if it was raining he (Gaffney) would take him for training," said Bongli.

Gaffney, now headmaster at St Dominic's College in Welkom, said Lungi was multitalented, arriving at Hilton having represented the province in swimming, cricket, rugby and athletics.

Part of his coaching involved advising the schoolboy what sport to pursue:

"Cricket was the obvious one."

Gaffney said: "I don't think I've met anyone as humble and modest as him, which is awesome."

Lungi's parents said Hilton had made sure they would be there to support him at many matches, both home and away.

"They would send a car to fetch us. Sometimes it would be a metro cab," said Bongli. His father, Jerome, had played soccer while at school in rural Kranskop, while Bongli was a long-distance runner at Kranskloof Primary School in KwaDabeka.

Pierre de Bruyn, director of cricket and head coach at the University of Pretoria, steered Lungi into the next chapter of his life, making a number of trips to KwaZulu-Natal to recruit him for the Titans.

"I sat him down and explained to him the journey and the outcome of the journey that we could put together.

"At first he was a reluctant young man. He wasn't really sure how to leave home, what it would be like to be away from his family, which I understood," said De Bruyn.

"But it was my duty to convince him that where I would take him would be comfortable and that he would be looked after. That's why I went back, sat with him again and asked him to trust me in this journey."

Lungi then enrolled to study industrial sociology and labour studies and took up a coaching job at Southdowns College in Centurion.

"At the Varsity Cup, he announced himself on television and people started to see who this kid was and what kind of bowler he is," said De Bruyn.

"They say you can take someone to water but you can't make him drink. Lungi (as he called him) drank."

Lungi himself said his parents motivated him. "It's Mom and Dad." He said his life right now was "a very happy moment" and he hoped to "keep the form" in the national team.



Lungi Ngidi celebrates taking the wicket of India's Mohammed Shami during the India vs South Africa second Test match in Centurion.

PICTURE: REUTERS/JAMES OATWAY/AFRICA NEWS AGENCY (ANA) ARCHIVES

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