

Phehlukwayo keeps batsmen guessing

By TELFORD VICE

● Was it? It was. Vinnie Barnes knew one when he saw one, and that was indeed a knuckleball that emerged from the accordingly gnarled hand of Andile Phehlukwayo.

"I saw him just before they went to Sri Lanka," Barnes, Cricket SA's high-performance manager, said this week. "He was in the nets at the high-performance centre in Pretoria and he was working on a knuckleball. He was in the early stages of experimenting with it."

Phehlukwayo completed his haul of 3/45 in the second one-day international in Dambulla by bowling a flummoxed Suranga Lakmal off his pads – using a knuckleball.

Borrowed from baseball

Knuckleball? It's something cricket has borrowed from baseball, bowled with a stiff wrist from the first knuckles. Ideally the ball should not spin at all but dart butterfly-like and then dip as it reaches the batsman. It's as damnably difficult to bowl as it is to hit.

But Phehlukwayo has, in a matter of weeks, mastered it. And more.

The kid's got a lot of balls. He could get through more than an over without bowling the same delivery: seam-up, cross-seam, knuckleball, back-of-the-hand, slower ball, slower bouncer, faster bouncer, leg-cutter,

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off-cutter ...

Only Lungi Ngidi took more wickets for SA than Phehlukwayo in the ODI series in Sri Lanka, where Phehlukwayo had a better average than Kagiso Rabada, Keshav Maharaj, JP Duminy and Junior Dala. He might seem gimmicky, but the truth is he has more confidence than the kind of pace that's the primary threat for Ngidi and Rabada.

"You see this quiet, unassuming guy, then he steps onto the field and he's got white-line fever," Barnes said of Phehlukwayo, who has been under his wing with SA as well as the elite bowlers' squad.

Was he a pioneer of white-ball bowling that's all about variation or was patience still a virtue?

"You've got to know what's your go-to ball in the situation," Barnes said. "How am I going to stop runs? Where can I limit the boundary option?"

"It's about knowing what my main stock delivery is, I've got to have that sorted. I've got to be able to bowl that with my

eyes closed.

"It can create a problem running in knowing you've got two or three slower balls, a slower bouncer, a bouncer, a back-of-the-hand ball. A bowler should have it nailed down to two or three options."

But he knew the game had changed since he roared in as an out-and-out quick, taking 323 wickets at 11.95 in 68 first-class matches.

"When I played it was a lot more straightforward, but nowadays a batsman can score in five different areas off the same ball. You've got to be thinking ahead the whole time."

Most expensive

The downside of Phehlukwayo's performance in Sri Lanka is that he was also SA's most expensive bowler, not something you want to be in an ODI series.

He might be able to avoid that happening in future by adding still another but not so new-fangled arrow to his quiver of variations.

"In the fourth one-day game in the last few overs I didn't see one yorker," Barnes said. "You don't want to be predictable but that should still be the go-to ball at the death."

And if you have a knuckleball how hard can a yorker be to acquire?



Andile Phehlukwayo could bowl more than an over with different deliveries.



Lungi Ngidi was the leading wicket-taker for SA in the ODI series against Sri Lanka.

