



WORDS: ANITHA MADIKIZELA

# SA'S NEW

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*Wisden Cricket Monthly* voted Aiden Markram the third-best young player in world cricket after a sensational first year for the Proteas







## AIDEN MARKRAM

**AIDEN MARKRAM BURST ON TO THE INTERNATIONAL SCENE IN 2017-18**, scoring 1 000 Test runs in an astonishing debut season. Feted by *Wisden* as one of the brightest young talents on the world stage, his road to the top has been far from easy.

It's hard to imagine that, only a few years ago, Markram was in the same boat as many young South African cricketers who felt lost in the system. Born and raised in Centurion, he grew up in the Northerns cricket structures and was raved about as an exciting talent since his days playing for Pretoria Boys High School. His love for sport was instilled from a young age and he grew up playing cricket and soccer before cricket took precedence during his high school years.

After matriculating in 2012, Markram was set to continue his dreams of becoming a professional cricketer. The following year he joined the Tuks Cricket Academy at the University of Pretoria (UP) and became an integral part of the Tuks team that dominated the NCU Premier League (they've won the league eight seasons in a row), the National Club Championships (five trophies in the past seven years, with Markram scoring a double century and winning the Player of the Tournament award in 2014), as well as being part of the first Tuks team to win the Varsity Cricket tournament, at which he was named Player of the Tournament in 2015.

His defining cricketing moment was at the 2014 ICC U19 Cricket World Cup, when he captained the young South Africans to the prestigious international trophy. This was a big moment for the team and the country as it was South Africa's first ICC trophy since the knock-out tournament of 1998. The squad, which included Kagiso Rabada and Andile Phehlukwayo, were greeted as heroes upon their return from the United Arab Emirates and hailed as the beacons to guide the senior team to a trophy in the near future. Markram was sensational throughout the tournament, taking the mantle of leading run-scorer for the junior Proteas with 370 runs at an average of 123.33 (S/R 77.89) and was awarded the Player of the Tournament honour to cap an all-round brilliant display of leadership and individual performances. He also picked up the Player of the Match award in the 2014 final after scoring an unbeaten 66 to help South Africa beat Pakistan by six wickets to clinch the trophy.

After such a high, it would have been understandable if he felt slightly disappointed (and a bit hard done-by) for not breaking into the senior men's team along with Rabada and Phehlukwayo, but Markram saw the glass as half full.

'It was really awesome to see some of our U19 group burst on to the scene right after the World Cup. It provided me with a sense of belief that we could indeed play at this level,' he told *SA Cricket* magazine. 'KG and Andile are real X-factor players, and I just had to know my time would come.'

True to his word, instead of rolling over and licking his wounds, he prioritised his amateur and club career and spent two high-class seasons with Northerns and Tuks Cricket Club before he won his place in the Titans squad. A glimpse into his state of mind at the time shows his mental fortitude.

'I was pretty calm at the time. There was a whole load of quality top-order players at Titans so it allowed me to develop a game plan and spend time understanding my game before getting an opportunity.'

The Titans are well known for rearing outstanding Proteas players and Markram is another prime example. However, he had to work extra hard to get the opportunity in the Titans team as the squad was laced with plenty of young talent and established stars in a tough battle for places. Luck was on his side this time around, however, with former Proteas 'keeper »





(and current Titans coach) Mark Boucher recognising the young man's potential from the get-go. After a disappointing debut in the 2015 Ekasi Challenge (losing to the Lions by four wickets), Markram soon established his place in the Titans set-up as an opening batsman and a top-class fielder with speed and enthusiasm, while also offering some occasional right-arm off spin. Boucher's appointment as Titans coach proved to be an inspired call from the Titans Board as he heralded and groomed a new generation of stars, while keeping his senior players and dressing room appeased.

Under Boucher's stewardship, Lungi Ngidi, Tabraiz Shamsi, Junior Dala, Heinrich Klaasen and Markram were given regular opportunities to play for the Titans and have since gone on to represent their country with varying degrees of success. Markram never shies away from discussing Boucher's influence in his rise and rise to the top.

'Mark put a lot of responsibility on me to set up my innings well. Once I had done that, my job as a youngster was to not only get going with the bat but also to take things deep,' says Markram.

The team went on to win four out of the six domestic trophies in the past two years, including two T20 trophies in a row (2016-17 and 2017-18), the 50-over competition (2016-17), and the domestic first-class cricket trophy (2017-18).

With all that success, it's hard to believe they could have won one more trophy in 2016-17 but were unlucky to narrowly miss out on winning the first-class trophy by just one point, killing the ambitious dream of 'the domestic treble', to top off what was already a successful 2016-17 campaign.

Markram was a vital cog in that well-oiled Titans machine and his stellar performances throughout both campaigns – he averaged above 50 in first-class and 50-over cricket – had the public questioning why he wasn't selected for the national team.

The pressure on the CSA selectors reached breaking point in 2017 as various openers were tested alongside Dean Elgar in the lead-up to (and during) the disastrous tour to England, before the selectors eventually succumbed to a watershed moment and gave Markram a chance to prove himself in the home series against Bangladesh that followed.

Markram became the perfect foil to Elgar at the top of the innings, and the relationship between the two looked formidable from the beginning, the left-handed Elgar is happy to dig in and build the SA innings around the right-handed



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Markram, who in turn is constantly looking for bad balls to put away to keep the innings moving forward. On his Test debut, they posted a 196-run stand which ended in the infamous run-out incident that saw Markram dismissed just three runs short of his century. Markram refused to blame Elgar, commenting that 'if you had given me 97 before the start of the day's play I would have taken it.'

The pair put the incident behind them and continued to build their symbiotic relationship as both accumulated plenty of runs throughout the summer. Markram racked runs at an impressive rate as South Africa faced off against Zimbabwe, India and Australia, winning all three Test series along the way. The world stopped and paid attention as he reached 1 000 Test runs in just 10 matches to stamp his authority on the Proteas' opening position.

It hasn't all been smooth sailing, as he had to shoulder the captaincy during a

disastrous ODI series against India after injury to Faf du Plessis. The Proteas lost the series 5-1, Markram scoring just 127 runs in six innings at an average of 21.16.

'It was a massive honour to captain the Proteas, but it was a tough month or so as I would have ideally liked to have won the series. But I learned a lot and took a lot of lessons from that series and that challenge,' says Markram. He took the disappointment in his stride and didn't let it affect his Test form, going on to top-score with 480 runs in the Test series against Australia, with two centuries and a 50, as the Proteas smashed Australia 3-1.

'I really enjoyed the heated Australian series. The intensity was right up there. How the series unfolded was not ideal but the level of cricket was a massive challenge,' he smiles.

Riding the crest of international success, the young man must have inevitably felt invincible heading into the tour of »





AIDEN MARKRAM

## 'RAY CHALLENGED ME IN THE WAYS I NEEDED TO BE CHALLENGED AND MANAGED TO FIND THE BEST IN ME'

Ever the optimist, Markram wasn't keen on dwelling on his recent disappointment.

'Sri Lanka was a tough tour for me, by far the toughest it's been so far in my short career. Having had some recent time away from the game, it's made me hungry to knuckle down again and try to get better as a player,' says Markram.

During his career he has proved he can tough it out through hard times, and the combination of his achievements and this strong character would have convinced the editors of *Wisden* to rank him the No 3 best young player in the world.

'I've never really been too fazed in terms of personal rankings. There's plenty of young, world-class players on the scene at the moment and it's healthy for cricket in general,' says Markram. He has plenty of backers confident he will get back to world-beating form, including former Proteas and SA U19 head coach, Ray Jennings, who said he knew early on that Markram was a very special talent.

Perhaps none of this rollercoaster ride would have been possible if Jennings himself hadn't been short of a batsman while preparing for the 2014 U19 Cricket World Cup. Markram credits Jennings' belief in him for how far he has come in his cricketing career.

'Ray had backed me out of nowhere, to be honest. He almost had no right to back me the way he did. I hadn't given him any ammo to fight the battle of selection and yet he believed in me and has played a huge role in where I stand today. He challenged me in the ways I needed to be challenged and managed to find the best in me,' recalls Markram.

But for that fateful phone call from former coach Jennings, the great talent that has arisen in the shape of Aiden Markram might well have been lost to the world of cricket.

After watching him over the past year, that would indeed have been a sporting tragedy. ◀

ANITHA MADIKIZELA IS A CSA ACCREDITED CRICKET SCORER BASED IN PRETORIA.

Sri Lanka ... but the subcontinent is not known to be kind to those who aren't accustomed to its conditions.

He told reporters before the first Test in Galle that, 'I would like to do well this tour because it is outside South Africa. You don't want to be labelled as a guy who only does well in home conditions.'

Unfortunately, things didn't go well for the Proteas as Sri Lanka ripped through the South African batting line-up with startling (and sometimes unwatchable) ease. Immense scrutiny was placed on the senior batsmen in the side as the team folded for less than 130 runs in three of their four innings, at the same time recording a record low total of 73 in the second innings of the first Test. The final analysis saw them concede the series 2-0 to the Sri Lankans.

Understandably, the South African public was disappointed with the result and quick to chastise a lot of the Test batsmen after their disappointing showing. Markram found little redemption in the ODI series that followed as the demons

from the Test series followed him into the one-day format. Even though South Africa won the five-match series 3-2 (after leading 3-0), his poor form saw him dropped for two matches in the series after scoring just 23 runs (ave 7.66) in his three innings at the top of the order.

After a dazzling start to his international career, it will be fascinating to watch how the young man recovers from the Sri Lanka blip. As we all know, stepping up to the crease is a lot easier when riding on good form, but the true mark of class is how a player reacts when the chips are down and the world seems to be on their shoulders.

### MARKRAM'S NUMBERS

	Mat	Inns	NO	Runs	HS	Ave	SR	100	50	4s	6s
TEST	12	22	0	1040	152	47.27	63.18	4	3	138	5
ODIs	10	10	0	216	66	21.60	88.52	0	1	22	5
FIRST-CLASS	51	87	5	3747	182	45.69	60.42	10	18	523	33
LIST A	36	35	1	1223	183	35.97	93.71	4	2	134	24
T20s	30	27	5	781	82	35.50	125.56	0	7	78	21

As at 1 September 2018

