

Faf du Plessis sends one into the stands against the West Indies in the ICC Champions Trophy



# NO FAFFING ABOUT

*On current form, he's South Africa's most dangerous batsman. Richard Asher spoke with Faf du Plessis and discovered that he won't be taking a backwards step this summer*

**S**outh Africa have a nasty habit of unleashing killer rookies against Australia. These newcomers have tended to hit the ground running against us. Think Graeme Smith, JP Duminy, Vernon Philander. Freshest in the memory for Australians, though, is Faf du Plessis. It was November 2012 when the test debutant stunned the Adelaide Oval faithful with a rearguard of epic proportions to save a Test. It was a marathon knock you couldn't help but respect.

After four sessions, 466 minutes and 376 balls at the crease, it's no wonder Faf (it's short for François) was cramping badly in the last act. But his resistance held like glue. Glue that holds an innings together. The runs he made – 110 of them – were almost immaterial in the context of rescuing a Test. It was the time in the middle that counted, and those hours announced him as a man willing to graft. You knew he put a premium price on his wicket. A five-day captain's dream.

## Firing on all fronts

So... an old-school blocker then? Too stodgy to be an asset in limited-overs cricket? Afraid not. Fast-forward to the triangular tournament in Harare this winter. Mr Versatility is in the form of his life. In five One-Day International matches – three of them against Australia – du Plessis lashes three hundreds. And he's very unlucky to fall just a couple short of a record-breaking fourth in the final. He's man of the series, with an average of 92.80.

No worries on the limited-overs front, then. This guy can switch modes with the best of them. He actually made his name in the one-day game, having made his debut in early

2011 – almost two years before he showed his Test nous in Adelaide. And though he wasn't an automatic selection until a couple of months ago, he has had the job of captaining the South African T20 International side for a couple of years now.

It's only since the Zimbabwe tournament – South Africa's first since the retired Jacques Kallis's place opened up – that his place in their ODI line-up has firmed. He didn't even have a century in the format before Zimbabwe. Now he looks set to be around in all forms of the game for years to come.

He isn't a serious bowler, but feels at least partly responsible for filling the void left by

**“Those hours announced him as a man willing to graft. You knew he put a premium price on his wicket”**



Du Plessis is ranked in the top 15 batsmen in the world in all formats – and he's climbing quickly



The South African takes time out during a training session in Bangladesh for the 2014 ICC World T20



## The AB connection

Few international cricketers share a closer bond than Faf du Plessis and AB de Villiers. Okay, they're not actual brothers, but they are school mates who go way back.

AB was always the one with the all-round natural sport ability to make you sick with envy, but in cricket, at least, Faf was never far behind de Villiers. Both reached the first team at the Affies school about three years ahead of time.

At an Afrikaans school, there would have been pressure on them to pursue rugby. Faf's father was a Currie Cup player, after all. That they have chosen cricket is a blessing for the game.

Their kinship is evident when South Africa's two limited-overs skippers bat together. It can feel like there's a third force out there when you're trying to prise their partnership apart. Australia found that out more than once in the Zimbabwean triangular.

"Lots of credit to Faf," said de Villiers after that tournament. "He had an amazing series, and set us up nicely every time we played. It made it easy for us to bat around him."

Faf probably thought AB did that a little too well when his captain smashed South Africa rather too close to their target with overs to spare against Australia in the final. It ultimately meant du Plessis just missed out on a fourth century in the triangular.

"I feel very blessed to get three hundreds in a series. But today would have been a special one," said du Plessis afterwards, outwardly unruffled.

If the AB-Faf bond can survive that kind of awkward moment, you know it must be strong...



*Du Plessis gets one away during the ICC Champions Trophy in Wales earlier this year*



### Du Plessis's batting stats

Batting	Mat	Inns	Runs	HS	Ave	SR	100	50	4s	6s
ODIs	55	53	1720	126	35.83	87.22	3	6	143	6
T20Is	20	20	553	85	34.56	125.96	3	10	144	25

Kallis with the bat. Slotting in at three, you can understand why.

"It's a position I wanted to make my own," says du Plessis. "Batting at three suits me better than number six did. It gives me a bit of time to set up my innings nicely. When someone like Jacques steps out you really feel you've got really big shoes to fill.

"But I'm getting used to the role now. Batting three in Tests too has made it a bit easier to slot in for the one-dayers. My job is to score hundreds, and I really enjoy it."

"I've always known that he was capable of doing that," adds his captain AB de Villiers. "Leading up to a big World Cup, it's great to have our No.3 slot cemented down now by a

guy who's in great form and a guy with a great cricket brain."

### Leadership material

Some might actually argue that du Plessis is doing a better job of mode-switching with the bat than Kallis did at this stage in his career. And like the burly legend, du Plessis is a safe pair of hands, but he's a lot more spring-chicken in the field!

It's part of the reason du Plessis has been put in charge of South Africa's T20 International troops when he plays. He now has 16 games, including several in South Africa's failed 2014 ICC World Twenty20 campaign, under his belt as leader. Though he's won nine of them, his tactics have not been without criticism during his tenancy. But you can be sure South Africa will have taken all of those lessons on board ahead of this November's clashes.

After his antics in Adelaide and Harare, not to mention his resistance in the Cape Town Test this year, Australia have a swag full of motivation to get Faf du Plessis back in the hut as early as possible this summer. But they know it will take something special to send him on his way. And in the meantime, they'll be hoping the Saffers don't have another scary rookie up their sleeves!

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