

Australia advances to the 1999 ICC Cricket World Cup final after South Africa's Allan Donald is run out in the last over of the semi-final

A RIVALRY UNRIVALLED

As we enter the next chapter in Australia and South Africa's ongoing cricketing duel, **Richard Asher** looks back at the moments that have shaped the tale thus far

“If I ruled the world, every day would be the first day of spring, and Australia and South Africa would go at it every week”

Englishman Rob Steen truly spoke for cricket’s neutrals when he wrote the above words in an article for Cricinfo earlier this year. After all, they came on the back of yet another absorbing contest between the nations. Australians and South Africans knew exactly what he was talking about.

If space invaders visited Earth and wanted to see what this cricket lark was all about, these are the two teams you’d summon for an all-round display of excellence and entertainment. No clash has become more reliably potent across all three forms of the sport.

England will always be an Aussie side’s sweetest scalp. Beating them earns an Aussie captain popular hero status. But they, like India, cannot always be counted upon for a gritty fight in all corners of the world. Nor in all forms of the game.

But you can bet your last dollar that Australia’s favourite southern foes will always come out fighting. When said captain reflects on his most satisfying, hardest-earned wins, his mind will pause long on South Africa matches. They’re almost never a giveaway. Not any more.

It’s not just the 112 years of cricketing history between these two nations that does it.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

February 26, 1992

Limited overs cricket was born during South Africa’s isolation from the international stage, so it was 1992 before Australia and South Africa met in an official ODI. The stage could not have been bigger: it was the ICC Cricket World Cup. South Africa had only just been re-admitted to the world game, but upset the hosts with a comfortable chase of 170 to win by nine wickets in Sydney.

There’s a far broader sporting rivalry to feed the passions. The countries’ rugby players hammer away at each other for several months each year, the winners as hard to pick as they are in cricket.

September 6, 2014 was a case in point. Australia and South Africa faced each other in the final of the triangular One-Day International tournament in Zimbabwe, while across the ocean the Wallabies played the Springboks in Perth. Australia took the rugby honours that day, but the cricket trophy ▶

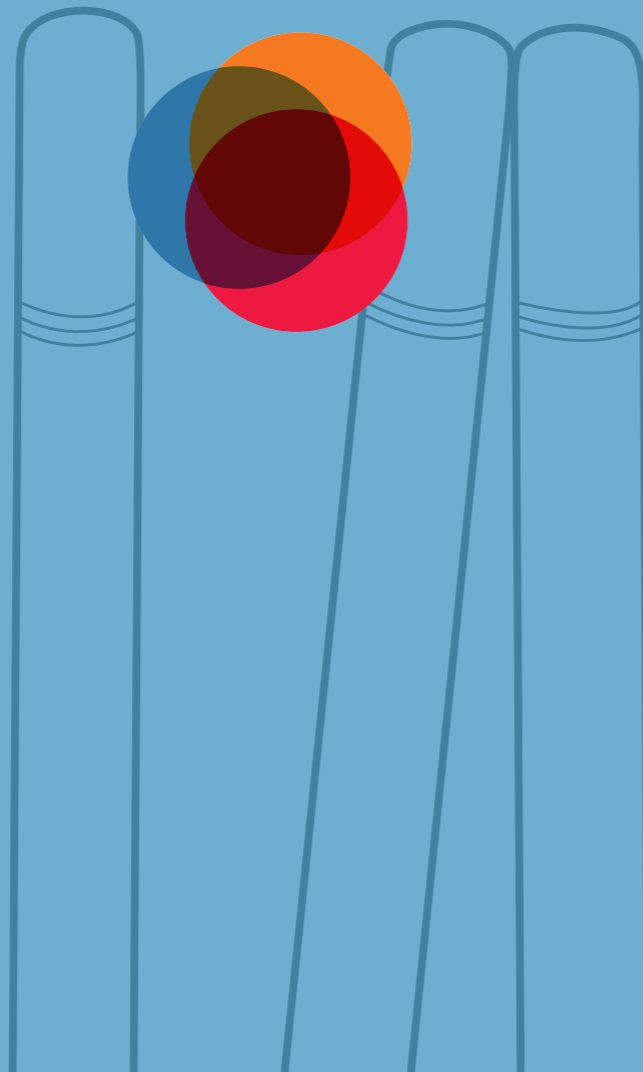


Pre-match formalities between Australia’s Allan Border and South Africa’s Kepler Wessels at the 1992 ICC Cricket World Cup



Former captains Graeme Smith and Ricky Ponting shake hands after a WACA Test in 2012-13

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Above: Australia's Dean Jones (also top right) congratulates South Africa's Kepler Wessels, whose 81 n.o. helped his side to a classic World Cup win



MEMORABLE MOMENTS

June 17, 1999

Australia faced an in-form South Africa for a place in the final of the 1999 ICC Cricket World Cup in England. Steve Waugh had his magician in Shane Warne. Hansie Cronje had big-hitting Lance Klusener. South Africa's absorbing chase of 214 very nearly succeeded, but they ran out of nerve in the final over as last man Allan Donald lost his wicket in one of cricket's most famous – and farcical – run-outs. The game was tied, but Australia went through to the final thanks to their superior record in the group stages.



It's never hard to find a South African or two in Oz – these fans were snapped in Adelaide, 2012

went to South Africa. As so often between these two proud sporting nations, frazzled fans on both continents had to settle for calling the day a draw.

Two of a kind

When you consider just how much these countries have in common, it should come as no great surprise that things have gotten as ding-dong as they have. They're both ex-British and little older than a century as unified nations. Both feature few cities and vast, pastoral hinterlands that produce a steady stream of strong, farm-reared sportspeople. They're both used to being considered a long way from anywhere.

Both have relatively small sporting populations and, helped along by climates that allow year-round sport, overachieve on the world stage in spite of it. They share a keen rivalry with New Zealand. Both have a deep fondness for a beer and a barbie (or a braai, as the Saffers would have it). And unlike the Poms, neither land's citizens will stand entranced at the sight of sun and blue sky. They'll break out the cricket gear instead.

These are two countries that get each other on a deep level. As much as anything it is this cultural familiarity that makes Australia and South Africa savour their fights so much. It makes them love to hate each other just that little bit more. And that's even easier now,

given the growing expat community (Tony Greig was one of them, and how Australians loved to mock him!) on these shores. It's never hard to find a bit of face-to-face banter.

As for cricketing squabbles, well, that's a battle that has been going on since their first Test series in 1902. The result that year, across the water in SA, was 2-0 to Australia. Five decades of Baggy Green dominance followed, with Australia only losing one match until the drawn series in Australia in 1952-53.

South Africa took a turn at dominance in the Sixties and then again in 1970, taking two successive home series by margins of 3-1 and 4-0 respectively. But after that apartheid sanctions intervened, and two of cricket's most



MEMORABLE MOMENTS

March 24, 2007

Australia was the favourite for the ICC Cricket World Cup in the Caribbean. South Africa, as always, were tipped as the one team that might stop them, and were unbeaten going into the group match between the heavyweights. The Aussies posted 377, with Matthew Hayden making a ton. At 0-160 in the 21st over it looked like we might see another monumental chase-down, but it wasn't to be this time. The Aussies bowled them out for 294. This game did mental damage that led to an easy Australian win over South Africa in the subsequent semi-final.

and won. That big result showed that they were back, all the more gritty for their time away. And it kicked off part two of a rivalry that would play out in two – and more recently three – different formats of the game.

The first post-isolation Test series between the sides were close affairs, but as the Nineties turned to the Noughties the Aussie side became nigh on unbeatable. South Africa, along with most everyone else, had no answer for Waugh, Warne, McGrath, Ponting and co in the longer format. The punishment was particularly bad for South Africa, though. It was as though Australia still felt the wounds festering since that 1970 whitewash.

The Proteas – as the South Africans came to be known post-isolation – were far more competitive in the limited-overs game. For a time in the 1990s, under the leadership of Hansie Cronje, they became the side to beat in One-Day Internationals. Needless to say, their rivalry with Australia was very keen indeed. It remained so after Cronje's deposition, as Shaun Pollock and then Graeme Smith took over the reins.

The Aussies were the ones who managed to take silverware, though. It was Steve Waugh's – and then Ponting's – men who kept their cool in the big tournaments. South Africa didn't, and twice – in 1999 and 2007 – it was Australia who put paid to their World Cup hopes before taking the trophy themselves.

Away from the knock-out pressure of tournament cricket, though, things were always tough to call. The away series in early 2006 epitomised all that is good about this rivalry. In one of the greatest series of modern times, the heavyweights went to the Johannesburg decider tied up at 2-2. There, the most astonishing game of ODI cricket was played out. South Africa conceded a staggering 434, only to shock the world by chasing it down for a score of 438.

MEMORABLE MOMENTS

March 12, 2006

The five-match away series was poised at 2-2 when the teams arrived at the Wanderers for the finale. The Johannesburg venue is known for runs, but record books went flying out of windows that day. Sickened SA fans went streaming out of the gates, too, after Ricky Ponting's 164 led Australia to a history-making 434. Yet South Africa, led by 175 from a worse-for-wear Herschelle Gibbs, went four better with a ball to spare. The freakish happenings of the game now known as '438' still leave fans on both sides of the Indian Ocean in disbelief.

In 2006, a disappointed Ricky Ponting leads his side from the field with South Africa's now-legendary score of '438' on the scoreboard

compelling heavyweights had to lay down their bats and balls for 22 long years.

Post-apartheid

The cricketing world was a very different place by the time the South Africans were re-admitted in the early Nineties. When the teams finally met again in 1992, it wasn't in whites. It was yellow versus green, it was under lights, and the contest was 50-overs-a-side World Cup cricket.

South Africa, led by sometime Australian Kepler Wessels, picked the Hollywood script

Young Aussie fans show their pride at the WACA in 2012, and (bottom) David Warner is leading the new generation of Aussie cricket superstars



MEMORABLE MOMENTS

March 12, 2014

Rain in Durban made for one of the shortest matches in limited-overs international history. The planned T20 International became a bizarre seven-overs-a-side affair. South Africa posted 80, at a merry 11 to the over, but what was par for such a microscopic innings? A few more, it turned out, as David Warner got Australia off to a flyer and veteran Brad Hodge clubbed two final-over sixes to seal the win.

T20 and beyond

Earlier that year the pugilists had received a third ring in which to fight: Twenty20. Australia took first blood in the inaugural T20 International between the two nations, cruising home by 95 runs at the Gabba. Typically, though, the South Africans managed to strike back in the Wanderers one-off that preceded the epic ODI series.

But despite the see-sawing limited-overs narrative, there was no sign of change at Test level. Australia were still dishing out hammerings. They managed to shake off the

“The cricketing rivalry between Australia and South Africa is now boiling hotter than ever before”

'438' shock to chalk up a 3-0 result in the away Tests that summer.

But then the greats of that golden Australian age began to retire, and the contest in whites caught up with the limited-overs ferocity. Graeme Smith led a winning side here in the summer of 2008-09, and since then the Test story has been a bloody and compelling one. The balances keep tipping back and forth, whether in the context of a session, a day, a match or a series. Counting that and the four subsequent Test series, the match tally stands at 6-6, with two draws.

All of which means that the cricketing rivalry between Australia and South Africa is now boiling hotter than ever before. It's only in the last few years, since the Test contest evened up, that it's been cooking in all forms of the game. This summer is all about limited-overs cricket, but make no mistake, there are more bubbling feuds and angry scars than ever before. There's history enough – much of it fresh – to be certain of that. ✓

