



Changing of THE GUARD

Our South African correspondent **RICHARD ASHER** takes a critical look at the Proteas' chances heading into this Commonwealth Bank Test Series, and discovers a very different beast from the last team to tour our shores

Last time South Africa's Test cricketers visited Australia, Graeme Smith's men went home with a 1-0 victory. On their previous trip, his gritty crew prevailed 2-1. A little context, perhaps? Well, no other touring side has so much as won a Test in Australia in the four years since the Africans' most recent victorious departure.

The upshot is this: these hat-trick hungry South Africans are marked for revenge by a nation with a proud home record. And Australia have reason to be hopeful. Why might that be? Well, the talismanic Smith has moved on, as has Jacques Kallis. Injuries,

along with untimely losses of form, have seen South Africa plummet from No.1 in the Test rankings in November 2015 to fifth at the time of writing. The aura is fading.

The standout Test generalissimo of the century so far, the loss of Smith – who walked away after one last Mitchell Johnson barrage in 2014 – has proven a Johnson-esque body blow to South Africa. Hashim Amla led the side for 18 months but never thrived in the role. AB de Villiers would have captained the side this summer, but elbow surgery has ruled him out. Faf du Plessis, with just 31 Tests to his name, shapes as the man to step in.

Then there's Kallis. It's almost two years since he retired with a century against India,

but this ace-of-all-trades is still missed in every department – even the slips. Between Kallis and Smith alone, 283 Test caps' worth of experience have been gutted out of the South African team.

FILLING IN THE GAPS

So large is the void these burly giants of the game have left, that you can be forgiven for thinking South Africa have lost more players than they have. In fact, it's Australia who have lost more personnel on the batting front, with Shane Watson, Ricky Ponting, Michael Clarke and Mike Hussey all gone from the top order that finished the last home South Africa

Graeme Smith, pictured left, was the successful leader last time South Africa visited; but can they achieve the same without him?



AB de Villiers has taken over as South Africa's new Test captain, but will miss this series; (below) Jacques Kallis; and (bottom) coach Russell Domingo

“Experience here is critical to plotting future success, as Smith and Kallis discovered on multiple visits”

series. But Australia's newer faces are not playing Australia in Australia. Experience here is critical to plotting future success, as Smith and Kallis discovered on multiple visits before they won so much as a match. The visitors will feel their missing men more: in the dressing room, in the relatively threadbare batting order and in the lack of a genuine all-rounder.

Beyond these two colossi, not a lot may have changed apart from a somewhat revolving door of spinners and de Villiers finally giving up the gloves to promising specialist Quinton de Kock. Yet that nagging feeling that the South African cupboard has been utterly devastated does have some basis in recent reality. That's thanks to names like Dale Steyn, JP Duminy and du Plessis all missing matches due to injury and form in the past year. At a time when South Africa cried out for stability, they got the opposite.

About those injuries: Steyn, Morne Morkel and Vernon Philander remain world-class, but the gently ageing trio don't have such reliably purring motors as four years back. All have begun missing significant chunks of cricket.

Steyn, in particular, missed the better part of two major series against India and England in 2015-16, triggering doubts he'd ever be the world's No.1 Test bowler again. He answered those by bagging 10 Kiwi wickets at 10.20 in August, which means he needs just six scalps here to pass Shaun Pollock as his country's highest wicket-taker. But odds on all three of Steyn, Morkel and Philander getting through all three Tests intact this summer are far longer than before, and that's an issue for South Africa.

OFF THE BAT

While fitness is concern number one for South Africa's bowling, form has been the trouble for their batting. Amla and de Villiers are the two remaining superstar names in the line-up. Their contributions were vital on the last tour, particularly in the WACA Test that won South Africa the series. It was Amla's imperious second-innings 196 that put his side in an impregnable position, and de Villiers added to his collection of devastating tons under the Perth sun too. But now the latter, on the back ▶



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AWAY RUN

From 2006 until their India tour last November, South Africa went nine years undefeated on the road. The only series they lost was at home, to Australia. Here's their list of away results in that period, with all but the last three series led by Graeme Smith (pictured right).



(SA scores first)		2010-11	Pakistan	0-0	
2007-08	Pakistan	1-0	2011-12	New Zealand	1-0
2007-08	Bangladesh	2-0	2012	England	2-0
2007-08	India	1-1	2012-13	Australia	1-0
2008	England	2-1	2013-14	Pakistan	1-1
2008-09	Australia	2-1	2014	Sri Lanka	1-0
2009-10	India	1-1	2014	Zimbabwe	1-0
2010	West Indies	2-0	2015	Bangladesh	0-0

of three successive ducks, has been ruled out of this series. Amla is back in the runs since a horror patch against India and England in 2015-16, though his failure to convert two 50s against New Zealand in August suggests he's not quite back to his best.

As far as this series goes, the reliance on Amla stares you in the face as you look down the team card. JP Duminy and Faf du Plessis need no introduction after their exploits on Test debut here, but neither of these batsmen built on those starts. Dean Elgar will provide gritty presence at the top of the order, but is arguably no Smith. Stephen Cook, his new opening partner, has made an excellent start to his Test career but only has three matches behind him, while much the same can be said for the internationally inexperienced Temba Bavuma.

More so than the absence of bowlers to injury, the porous batting has been responsible for a dramatic dip in results for South Africa. Heading to India as the No.1 Test side in the world last November, undefeated in a series by any team since 2006 apart from Australia, their batting failed spectacularly on spinning

wickets as neither Amla nor de Villiers fired. They lost 3-0. Then, facing England at home, they went down 2-1 amid a heap of cheap dismissals, winning only a dead rubber.

It was a thumping fall from grace, followed by a six-month wait for what rain reduced to a one-match home series against New Zealand. They won well, a morale-boosting hint of a turnaround that is the only remotely recent form to go on.

Since then, significantly, the selectors have been handed an apartheid hangover to handle. A board edict was laid down in September that all senior national sides will need to field "an average of six players of colour, of which two must be black African." With a fully fit squad and a horses-for-courses strategy, such a quota may equal some tough cricket decisions for coach Russell Domingo. He will hope the promise of flexibility is kept by his bosses. ▶



Dean Elgar is one of the names battling for a place at the top of South Africa's batting order; (left) Hashim Amla and Dale Steyn talk tactics; and (right) Amla in action



“Amla’s imperious second-innings 196 put his side in an impregnable position, and de Villiers added to his collection under the Perth sun too”



Morne Morkel



Jacques Kallis will be missed by the South Africans – not least for his excellence at slip



Kagiso Rabada

FALSE DAWNS

Both JP Duminy and Faf du Plessis chose Australia to announce emphatic batting arrivals in Tests, as those present at the MCG in 2008 or Adelaide in 2012 may recall. While both have done enough to keep their places in the side (most of the time), their numbers aren't what you might have expected if you watched them on their debuts. But the lesson to Australia for 2016 remains: watch out for any rookies!



Faf du Plessis in Australia 2012-13:
Adelaide (78 and 110*);
Perth (78* and 27);
Average: 146.50

Faf du Plessis since Australia 2012-13
Average: 37.31



JP Duminy in Australia 2008-09:
Perth (1 and 50), Melbourne (166)
Sydney (13 and 16)
Average: 49.20

JP Duminy since Australia 2008-09
Average: 29.74

SHINING LIGHTS

It's easy to find negatives around South African cricket right now, but bright spots certainly exist. Fresh-faced seamer Kagiso Rabada has provided an abundance of cheer and hope for the future. He's 21 years old and regularly sends down deliveries in excess of 145kmh. And he comes to Australia with 29 wickets at an average of 24.44 after just eight Test matches.

If Rabada can join a fit Steyn, Morkel and Philander in a four-pronged pace attack this summer, the quartet may be so good that it could paper over South Africa's ongoing lack of a world-class spin bowler. In that case there will be plenty of hope, and then it will be over to the batters: Amla certainly cannot build match-winning totals all on his own. If South Africa are to claim that hat-trick, their batting will need to perform beyond expectation.

They'll be pleased they're starting in Perth. There's something South Africans like about the WACA Ground. Their three visits there have seen them register a battling draw in 2005, followed by the famous chase of 414 in 2008 and that heavy win last time around.

Tasmania, the venue for the second clash, is an unknown for South Africa, with a drawn tour match in Devonport in 1997 (Kallis, who made a 50, might have had some insights to share) their only first-class form. Then it's Adelaide, a ground they've yet to crack since isolation. They'll return with memories of the extraordinary du Plessis rearguard four years ago, but will be playing in their first day-night Test. If last season's lively wicket is

reproduced, though, it may well work in the favour of their seam strength.

History suggests a fast start will be South Africa's best chance. If they can field fit bowlers, and batters at their very best, under strong du Plessis, Amla and Steyn leadership, they might just get it. Keep that going, and they could push Australia all the way in the series. Those are big 'ifs' right now. But South Africa rarely shy away from a challenge...

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