

Over The

Nick Sadleir was a seven-year-old growing up in Johannesburg when he watched an all-white South African cricket team readmitted into the international game. Here he puts into perspective where this different South African side's Test series victory against England and rise to the top of the rankings ranks.



Rainbow





South Africa's recent 2-0 Test victory over England and subsequent ascent to world number one in all three formats of the game - at the time of writing - ranks high in the country's history of great sporting achievements. Whilst not as nationally significant an achievement as an event such as the Springbok's victory at the 1995 Rugby World Cup, the Proteas' consistently excellent results (cricket World Cups aside) have made the country proud – especially when one considers the advances in transformation within the sport.

Hashim Amla was the player of the series but, had he been born a generation before, he would not have had the chance to play for his country on the grounds of his skin colour. The same goes for Vernon Philander, from a 'previously disadvantaged' background in the Cape, who was the man of the match at Lord's. Other 'coloured' players in the side include opener Alviro Petersen, who made 182 runs at Headingley, and JP Duminy, who performed consistently in the middle order. Leg-spinner Imran Tahir may have been born in Pakistan but he is proud to be South African and now relishes the opportunity to kiss the badge on his shirt whenever he takes a wicket. The evolution in composition of South Africa's cricket squads at both international and domestic level from all-white players to nearly 50% players of other races, has not compromised but strengthened the nation's performances.

'Coloured' all-rounder Basil D'Oliveira left South Africa to play in England in 1960 because non-whites' were barred

from playing first-class cricket during those days of Apartheid. That South African politicians would not allow the tour to take place with D'Oliveira in the squad shows the extent to which cricket was a white players only game in the country fifty years ago. The D'Oliveira affair acted as a catalyst in South Africa's impending isolation from sport and the national cricket team's 4-0 trouncing of Australia in 1970 was the last official international cricket the country would play for two decades. There could be no normal sport in an abnormal society.

Soon after Nelson Mandela was released from jail in 1990, four years even before he would officially become president, he chose the white sport of cricket as a medium towards reconciliation and integration and successfully urged India and the West Indies to host the Proteas for its first ODI and Test fixtures after readmission. Although quietly, Mandela implied his support for reverse or 'positive' discrimination when he said that; "selectors must be broad minded and make sure that the entire population is represented."

Political involvement and quota systems may have helped South African cricket in its struggle for transformation but it has been a bumpy road to travel – not playing the best team possible is seldom advisable at any level. Casualties along the way have included coaches and selectors and many a talented player left the franchise system through frustration over selectors' decisions – indeed the English player structures are littered with South Africans who felt they weren't



getting a fair chance at home.

It is impossible to redress decades of segregation and sporting inequality through a short period of reverse discrimination and the meteoric rise to the top of the world rankings by 'coloured' players like Amla (world number one batsman in ODIs and number two in Tests), Philander (number two bowler in Tests) and Lonwabo Tsotsobe (number two bowler in ODIs) is likely more as a result of equal opportunities rather than affirmative action.

Politicians meddle less with cricket now than they have done in the last 40 years in SA and the national side appears very much to be picked on merit alone. 45% of the 125 domestic-franchise contracted players in SA are not white and there is an understanding between the six franchises and Cricket South Africa (CSA) that no franchise starting XI should include fewer than four 'players of colour'. That there is no such quota for the national side shows the progress in population representation.

That the Proteas' Test, ODI and Twenty20 starting XI's have recently boasted no fewer than five non-white players, without enforcing any such quota, is a hallmark in the progress of the 'transformation'. The side's Test series victory and rise to world number one may not be as important nationally as South Africa's winning of rugby World Cups or even their tidy haul of gold medals at the recent Olympics, but when one considers that the series was emphatically won as much by 'players of colour' as it was by 'previously

advantaged' white cricketers the victory takes on greater significance and may come to be viewed so when historians look back.

But even with this success, plagued by persistent incidents of bad management and corruption, and recently accused of having a racist (too white) composition by the government, the CSA board has not excelled in offering cricketing support structures in the areas that had the least equal access to them in times gone by. Aside from a few stars like Makhaya Ntini and now Tsotsobe, the structures in place have failed to produce more than a handful of top-flight cricketers from a large base of talented black school cricketers. Imagine how strong South Africa could be if they had.



From top left clockwise:

Nelson Mandela, who chose cricket as a medium for reconciliation.

23rd April 1992: A group photograph of West Indies and South Africa before the first Test match at the Kensington Oval, Barbados.

20th August 2012: South Africa hold the ICC World Test Mace after their victory at Lord's saw them replace England as World No. 1

South Africa celebrate their two-nil series victory.

(All Getty images).